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ABSTRACT

Co-production occurs when two or more institutions contribute funds and labor to many of the processes of making course components for distance teaching. This paper summarizes reasons for international co-production of multimedia distance teaching courses and provides a lengthy checklist of questions that should be considered before entering upon such co-production. These include: (1) processes by which institutions should seek partners for co-production; (2) criteria for selecting partners; (3) procedures for selection of content and media by co-producers; (4) criteria for selecting content and media; (5) factors that could raise the cost of the co-produced course above that of a course produced by a single institution; (6) bases for evaluating the co-production; and (7) the rights of each contributing institution in making decisions about the course and/or its marketing. The second half of the paper consists of a composite case study based on the Open University experience of international co-production. The paper concludes with three questions regarding the justification for and cost-effectiveness of attempting international co-production of courses. (JB)

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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYSTEMATIC INSTRUCTION IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY.

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A working paper for the Congress of the Deutschen Gesellschaft für Erziehungwissenschaft at the University of Tübingen, March 8-10, 1978.

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# International co-production of distance-teaching courses

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This paper is about problems of international co-production of courses for use in distance-teaching systems. It is based on papers* written for and debated by the Steering Group on Educational Technology of the Council of Europe (of which Group I was Chairman) in 1974-75, and on experience gained by the Open University since that time.

## What is co-production?

Co-production simply means collaboration in making something, but co-production in the making of distance-teaching courses may take several forms. Two institutions may agree to award credit for a course produced by one of them, but that is not co-production. They may agree on the content of a course to be produced by one of them; that is much closer to co-production, since reaching agreement on content may be seen as an important part of the process of making a course. Both institutions may agree to provide funds, without both actually being involved in making the course; some people would call that co-production. But above all, co-production occurs when two or more institutions contribute funds and labour to many of the processes of making course components: these processes include selection of content and media, production of scripts for broadcasts, manuscripts for texts, specifications for kits, production and recording of the broadcasts, printing of the texts, manufacture and collation of the kits, and so on.

In passing, we should note that co-production at the international level is related to the development of exchanges. It can be argued that

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*DEPRAD, ANDRÉ (1974) Problems raised by international exchanges of educational software, Council of Europe.
EDMUNDSON, MAURICE (1975) Report of a colloquy on prospects of European cooperation in the development of educational multi-media systems, Council of Europe.
GARNIER, ROLAND (1974) European co-production of multi-media educational programmes: progress and prospects, Council of Europe.

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co-production is a fundamental step towards exchange, since the act of collaboration in making courses breaks down barriers that hinder exchange. Some of these barriers are similar to those that hinder co-production.

Why bother about international co-production?

One of the principal features of many distance-teaching systems is their capacity to take advantage of economies of scale. The per capita cost of teaching drops as more students are enrolled. A system can be expanded to take more students without a proportionate rise in costs. If this is true for a whole system, it is often true too for individual courses. Therefore it makes sense to use these courses in more than one system, thus pushing up the total enrolment for any one course.

Another feature of distance-teaching systems is that quite large capital sums are required for course development. Although the capital cost can be amortised over the years of the courses' life, it is clearly difficult for smaller systems to raise sufficient capital to make a wide range of courses. For these systems, some form of collaboration, such as co-production, is highly attractive because the capital cost of courses can be reduced. Even the larger systems, such as the Open University, may wish to widen the range of courses they can offer, at reduced cost, through co-production. There is, of course, a hidden assumption that courses co-produced by two institutions will cost less than double the cost of courses produced by single institutions.

In addition to these economic reasons for co-production, there are academic and cultural reasons. International co-production can draw upon the academic resources of more than one country, thus providing top-flight academic authors and access to art collections, scientific research installations, and so on. There are strong pressures for cultural cooperation, too. For example, there is talk of a Common Market of Knowledge. Countries with common cultural interests may thus encourage their academic institutions to co-produce courses. For multi-media courses, broadcasting institutions are drawn in too. Co-production may become a subtle form of cultural recolonisation between metropolitan countries and their former colonies, yet the advantages may be sufficient to outweigh the disadvantages.

International co-production is nothing new in Europe, where co-production of films was first suggested 25 years ago, to be followed soon afterwards

by co-production of television programmes, an activity that is brought to our attention almost daily in Britain by series co-produced with German and other European partners. Co-production between Scandinavian countries has a long and relatively successful record in both television and radio, with printed materials in support. Co-production arrangements have grown up between British and North American institutions for televison series. There is thus a fund of experience to draw upon. As distance-teaching systems have multiplied in various parts of the world during the past 10 years, their managers have turned to these co-producers for advice and guidance. We should be clear, however, that international co-production has seldom resulted in courses: more often, individual television programmes or series, not intended for study for credits or for use by any formal education institution, are the product. Producers of courses face all the problems encountered by their colleagues in broadcasting, plus a few more.

What are the problems of international co-production?
International co-production experiences in the education sector have not turned out to be universally happy, nor have they resulted in marked savings. The early promise of co-production may have been fulfilled in broadcasting, in spite of difficulties, but it has not been fulfilled in education. Distance-teaching systems attempting international co-production point to a number of substantial problems, even when collaboration is between countries with close cultural ties. Admittedly, very few courses have been co-produced to date, but it is possible to draw up a check-list of questions that should be considered if we are contemplating international co-production.

1 By what process will we seek partners for co-production?
For example:

- o through individual contact with potential producers (both academic and broadcasting institutions)?
- o through some kind of clearing-house or exchange, in which an index of potentially interested parties is maintained?
- o through government channels?
- o through an international organisation such as the Council of Europe or UNESCO?

2 On what criteria will we select partners (and be selected)?

For example:

- o minimum cultural differences?
- o a common language for use in co-production activities as well as in the actual teaching materials?
- o low chances of cultural or language domination of one partner by the other(s)?
- o equitable cost-sharing between countries (or institutions) of different sizes and wealth?
- o similarities between educational systems, particularly in standards and methods of awarding academic credit?
- o compatibility of production equipment and facilities?
- o agreement of trade unions?
- o willingness of institutions involved, particularly any universities, to sacrifice academic or content control sufficiently to permit genuine co-production?
- o parity of copyright law, to protect contributors' intellectual property?
- o capacity to market the products and willingness to share any profits?
- o experience in co-production?
- o availability of training in co-production?
- o demonstrated demand for distance-taught courses?
- o national prestige and status?
- o general flexibility and willingness to negotiate differences?

3 By what process will co-producers select content and media?

For example:

- o through deliberations of a joint academic committee on content?
- o through assigning to one partner the task of selecting content?
- o through calling for bids from, say, broadcasting organisations for the making and transmission of programmes?
- o through working with commercial publishers?

4 On what criteria will co-producers select content and media?

For example:

- o matching content to national curricula and examinations?
- o accessibility of media to learners in each of the co-producing countries?

- o availability of finance from commercially-oriented sponsors?
- o political orientation of content?

5 What factors will raise the cost of the co-produced course above that of a course produced by a single institution?

For example:

- o exchange (between countries) of planning and production personnel?
- o importation of specialised equipment for production purposes?
- o rights payments to contributors?
- o translation and dubbing?
- o copying?
- o transport and communications charges?
- o cancellation costs should one or more partners withdraw during the co-production process?
- o provision of certain components designed specifically for one of the partners (e.g., a special edition of a textbook for use in the version of the course to be available in country X but not for that in country Y)?

6 What will be the basis for evaluating the co-production?

For example:

- o by comparative study of the success of the course in the countries where it is used, against agreed objectives and using standardised methods?
- o by separate studies that take into account differences between countries' educational context and in their perception of evaluation objectives, as well as possibly using different methods?

7 Will agreement be reached before co-production on the basis for using the co-produced course? In particular, if one partner condemns the product, will other partners be entitled to continue its use and for how long? What rights will they have to market such a course?

This check-list is by no means exhaustive, but it serves to illustrate the problems. Members attending the CEAD conference will surely be able to add further questions from their own experience.

A case study

Historically, there have been strong cultural links between Country A and Country B. There is a long tradition of academics in both countries receiving some of their postgraduate training in the other country, and learned societies in both countries contain nationals from A and B. Textbooks written by authors in Country A are frequently prescribed in Country B and vice versa. The languages of the two countries are very closely related, and they share many common political and social institutions. Their broadcasting networks have strong links in spite of being somewhat differently organised, and have engaged in co-production from time to time as well as exchanging considerable numbers of programmes, particularly for television.

Against this background, it was hardly surprising when a proposal was hatched for co-production of a university-level course for distance-teaching purposes. As so often happens, the proposal first came to light at an international conference, in Country C, when two professors renewed a long-standing acquaintance. One was from a distance-teaching system, the other from a conventional university that used distance-teaching for some of its courses in an attempt to reach people who could not come to its campus.

For the two professors, the immediate pay-off they expected from co-production undoubtedly lay in building an empire that might be temporary but would certainly be splendid. They envisaged gathering together a team of internationally-recognised academics to prepare the content, which would be moulded into a fine course with the help of at least one national broadcasting organisation plus a well-known publishing house. The project would have high visibility and bring credit to the participating institutions as well as the proposers. The professors even envisaged world-wide sales that would more than pay for the (high) cost of production. These sales would be boosted by an independent evaluation sponsored by one of the educational foundations in Country C.

Before long, both professors had succeeded in interesting the heads of their institutions, and their governing councils, in the proposal. They compiled a list of eminent colleagues who expressed interest in the project, and obtained agreement in principle from the technical agencies whose services they were likely to need. To obtain funds took a little longer, but in less than one year from the time of their reunion, they were able to

announce that the co-production would go ahead within a matter of months. In due time, academics from Country A travelled to B to stay for two weeks at the university which had agreed to be host for the first course team meeting. They were accompanied by observers from a broadcasting organisation that would share making the television and radio programmes for the course.

The first day of the course team meeting was marked by positive and enthusiastic contributions. The general plan for the project was reviewed by one of the originators, while the other put forward an outline for the course itself. In the following days, the first signs of dissension appeared. Academics from Country A disagreed with those from B about the standard required of students entering the course, particularly in mathematics. Academics from Country B disagreed among themselves about which parts of the course they should contribute. In view of the fact that the course team would not be meeting for a further six months but working by correspondence it was essential that agreement should be reached by the last day. Differences were papered over, and a schedule of work for each member of the team was finalised by noon on the last day. The afternoon was taken up by a preliminary discussion of how the broadcast media could best be used. A few of the academics had experience of television, but none had ever used radio for teaching. The broadcasting representatives from both countries began to realise they would need to 'train' the academics. Those from Country A actually favoured employing professional presenters rather than academics. The two professors ruled out that alternative on grounds of cost, but also because they believed the authenticity of the programme would be seriously damaged if distinguished academics did not present their own material.

During the six months after the first meeting, individual authors worked on drafts of teaching text that would form the foundation of the course. They exchanged these drafts by post, and through these exchanges became increasingly aware of their differences, which could not easily be resolved at a distance. At the second course team meeting, held in Country A, two authors resigned and there was a general rumpus over whether or not the chairman (one of the originators) had powers to resolve differences, and what these powers actually were. One celebrated contributor, who had been unable to attend either meeting of the team, wrote to the chairman to say that he was not prepared to permit the team to adapt his material to fit

the teaching style that had been proposed by Country A and adopted somewhat reluctantly by those from B.

At the second meeting, firm proposals came forward for using 16 30-minute television slots, plus 12 10-minute radio slots. The proposals were drawn up by a working group from Country A of academics and broadcasters, and had been circulated, rather late, to Country B members of the course team, who now took exception to them. They pointed out that the length of programme was wrong: time was needed for commercial breaks on television, and to fit standard 15-minute slots on radio, in their country. They also found fault with the content, which they considered to be too academic. No sponsors would be willing to have their advertising linked to such high level material, even if there were as many as two or three thousand students willing to take a serious interest in it. For the general public, likely to make up the audience for the channels to be used, something more general and more entertaining would be necessary. After a heated debate, the course team agreed that the programmes should be changed to fit Country B's needs, on the assumption that serious students would use the texts, which would be pitched at university level. The group's proposals suffered further, however, when three academics stated that they did not wish to make general programmes which would not offer vehicles for displaying their theoretical and research contributions. One went so far as to say that the team could get 'Any old jumped-up school teacher to do the job'.

After the second meeting, the depleted course team was obliged by schedules already agreed with producers to press ahead with compromise plans that really satisfied nobody. In exchanges of correspondence it bacame clear that in fact Country B students would not be able to master the texts unless they had taken mathematics for two years in senior secondary school, thus limiting severely the numbers likely to enrol. Since the original proposal and funding had been based on optimistic assumptions about enrolment, Country B course team members lobbied for an additional set of texts, to be written by them, that could constitute a separate, lower-level course along with the broadcasts. They found a commercial publisher prepared to underwrite the whole cost of publishing these texts, and concluded a separate agreement for that purpose, without full consultation with Country A.

Throughout this difficult period, the two institutions remained on the same friendly terms they had enjoyed for decades. The co-production project was

regarded by many staff as somewhat costly and rather peripheral, but they were prepared to wait for the final outcome.

After two years of struggles, the course was born, very different in form and content from the one originally proposed. The cost was close to double that of a course produced by a single institution for distance-teaching. The originators admitted that they had underestimated the problems of collaboration, particularly of collaboration at a distance and between different countries. If they were tackling the task again, they said, they would try to draw up an initial agreement that would take care of many of the issues over which there had so much argument between course team members.

Problems continued during the first years of use of the course. An official evaluation, coordinated in both countries by a joint evaluation team, was to be carried out. Unfortunately, Country B succeeded in securing funds for this purpose, but in Country A the bid failed in a period of financial stringency. The evaluation team set up in Country B had difficulty in gaining agreement from the course team members about the objectives of the course and how success should be measured. Some members wanted direct measurement of student learning through tests as the only criterion. Others wanted measurement of tutor and student opinion, while still others preferred to have the course content assessed by experts who would submit critical reports. In the event, Country B never began to use the course for formal credit, because the governing body went back on an earlier agreement in principle, appointed a special panel to review the course, and denied it a credit rating. This rating denied, television companies were less interested in broadcasting the series and radio stations declared that the tapes were too tightly linked to the texts, which cost too much for all but serious students to buy. The evaluation team was disbanded. Country A used the course for credit, although the television programmes were considered to be sub-standard. No evaluation has yet appeared of Country A's use, of course, but several hundred students a year are taking the course.

It is just possible that the high cost of the course can be recouped through sales of the materials to other countries. Probably the course will not be sold as a whole; instead, the television series will sell, possibly with a short book written in support. Negotiations are proceeding for this book to be written by one of the course team members from Country B, but are held up temporarily by objections from the university teachers' union

in Country A, acting on behalf of an alienated course team member from that country. The two sets of texts are being marketed separately, by the commercial publisher in Country B and by Country A's distance-teaching system which has a network of agencies for marketing its own products. Country A's set does not refer to the television or radio programmes except in an introduction to the first volume. Country B's set refers frequently to the television programmes but never to radio.

Finally, there is a lawsuit pending against a Country A broadcaster who was stopped by the police when leaving the production studios in B and found to be carrying cannabis, which is no crime in Country A. If he receives a prison sentence, he says, he will not spend his time in jug studying the co-produced course, and he never wants to see Country B again.

This case study is based on actual occurrences, with one or two exceptions, but it is a synthesis of experience, both in order to highlight problems and to protect identities. It is scarcely over-drawn. The difficulties experienced by the co-production team members might have been overcome by better advance planning; the constraints they met are those of the real world. They were lucky to be able to avoid problems of different languages and of different conceptualisations of subject-matter. They had no problems of compatibility of broadcasting equipment or standards. There was comparatively little rivalry between the two countries or between the institutions from which the majority of the course team members came. They were provided with ample funds for the task. They were free of government intervention or political pressures. They might have succeeded more than they did.

Three questions remain. Is international co-production of courses for distance-teaching systems worth trying? Are the chances of success high enough to justify risking capital in such ventures? Are other forms of collaboration more likely to be cost-effective?